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**A REVIEW OF THE THIRD BIENNIAL CONFERENCE
OF THE SOCIETY OF AUTOMOTIVE HISTORIANS**

BY

DR. MARK D. HOWELL

**EXPLORING AUTOMOTIVE CULTURE: HERITAGE, SOCIETY, DESIGN
MARCH 8TH-11TH, 2000 AT THE PETERSEN AUTOMOTIVE MUSEUM
LOS ANGELES, CALIFORNIA**

For automobile enthusiasts, there is nothing better than sitting with colleagues and associates who share your love of all things driven by motors and wheels. Such was the case during the second week of March when the members of both the Society of Automotive Historians (SAH) and the National Association of Automobile Museums (NAAM) gathered for their third biennial meeting, held this year at the Petersen Automotive Museum in Los Angeles, California.

The conference got underway with an elegant dinner reception at the Beverly Plaza Hotel where the assembled historians, writers, and museum administrators had a chance to meet new people and rekindle old acquaintances. Good food, good drink, and good stories were shared by all as the meeting headed into its first full day.

Day one of the conference featured a pair of automotive culture tours in and around the Los Angeles area. Meeting attendees opened the day with a behind-the-scenes look inside the Petersen's vault. Cars and trucks representing all manner of makes, models, and years owned by the museum are housed in this section and normally off limits to visitors. After touring the museum's collection, conference participants climbed aboard buses for tours celebrating Southern

California's rich automobile history. One tour featured "automotive archeology" sites in Los Angeles and Pasadena, including a visit to a private automobile collection often closed to the general public. Another tour focused on motorsports competition around Southern California. This trip involved visits to the newly-opened Irwindale Speedway, the Justice Brothers Racing Museum, and the National Hot Rod Association (NHRA) Museum, where tour participants had a chance to meet NHRA founder Wally Parks. Given Southern California's legacy as a haven for motorsports like off-road and drag racing, this trip provided a rare glimpse of the men and machines that helped shape automobile competition in America.

The second day of the biennial conference opened with a humorous and thoughtful address by Michael Ware, director of the National Motor Museum in Hampshire, England. Ware spoke of the important role played by Automotive museums around the world, and how exhibits are designed to educate visitors about more than just machinery. He presented a slide show about a new exhibit in England that depicts the physical, cultural, and historical evolution of a small town's petrol station to demonstrate the main idea of his speech.

Ware's opening address set the stage for the various presentations that followed during the next day and a half. Over twenty-five speakers from around the world presented papers about a number of diverse topics, ranging in subjects from regional automotive culture and the culture of competition to museum fundraising techniques. Presenters represented a number of occupations, including college professors, librarians, museum directors, archivists, and automotive journalists. Discussions followed most of the presentations as conference participants asked questions and engaged in active discourse about all manner of subjects. The exchanges added to the dynamic nature of the SAH/NAAM conference and its attention to automotive scholarship.

The most engaging and unique scholarship was presented during the afternoon of day two. Several speakers lectured about the importance of teaching motorsports in college and university classrooms--a major issue given automobile racing's rapid growth and the sport's need for highly trained engineers, designers, and computer specialists. Ken Berg, an archivist from Mesa, Arizona, spoke about a concept called "the racer's edge," which means that competition naturally increases a participant's attitude and aptitude to strive for peak performance. Better management of resources and the self come from this--a trait that could be taught in classrooms and fostered in students through a practical introduction to motorsports and its competitive culture. Other papers in this panel dealt with the symbolism of automobiles in American literature, and urban history of historic speedways in and around the Los Angeles area, and a cultural/historical interpretation of Barney Oldfield, America's first professional race car driver and the first athlete to capitalize on the emergence of an evolving, national mass media.

After hearing several presentations about the automobile's impact on North American culture and society on day two, conference attendees were treated to another elegant dinner reception, this time held amongst the popular "Lowrider" customized car exhibit on the second floor of the Petersen Automotive Museum. Meeting participants enjoyed a sumptuous buffet surrounded by some of the most beautiful and exquisitely-detailed automobiles ever seen in one exhibit. Lowriders--cars that are chopped, channeled, fitted with hydraulics that lift and lower the chassis, and painted in many personalized motifs--are symbols of pride among Southern California's Hispanic community, and the Petersen's curators and exhibit staff created an amazing display celebrating this original and important part of California's automotive culture.

Another part of California's automotive cultures is its influence on car design. The final day of the 2000 SAH/NAAM conference featured a keynote luncheon with Charles Pelly, founder of Design Works, USA, who gave a slide presentation highlighting forty years of car design in Los Angeles. Pelly, whose company designs automobiles for BMW, spoke about his years in the design business and shared many stories about the highs and lows of his career. Pelly's firm works with students at several of Southern California's finest design schools, like the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, to promote youthful vision and creativity in the next generation of automobiles we might someday be driving.

Such was the focus of the 2000 third biennial Automotive History Conference in Los Angeles: the vision shared by automotive designers, manufacturers, and racers as interpreted and documented by academics, archivists, and museum administrators from around the world. Response to the confer-

ence was enthusiastic and exciting, and all those involved are looking forward to gathering again during the spring of 2002 to make more new friends and rekindle these most recent acquaintances.